

Statement of Chairman Tom Davis
Committee on Government Reform Hearing
*Porous Borders and Downstream Costs:
The Impact of Illegal Immigration on State, County and Local Governments*
County Administrative Center
San Diego, California
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Porous borders exact a high price. Ineffective immigration enforcement undermines respect for law and threatens national security. The steady flow of illegal immigration also passes unpredictable and largely un-reimbursed costs onto states and counties already struggling to maintain safe, healthy and prosperous communities. That *de facto* unfunded mandate is draining local law enforcement, health care and education budgets.

Today, we convene in San Diego to learn more about the intergovernmental impact of illegal immigration and to discuss the urgent need for enhanced border security. We particularly want to hear local assessments of efforts to strengthen enforcement at what is called the “internal border” where undocumented aliens apply for work, official documents and public benefits. As the people of this area know only too well, no effort to harden or patrol the international boundary will ever be one hundred percent effective. And those who enter legally, but subsequently violate the terms of their visa, should be detected and detained by vigilant internal enforcement systems. So we asked our witnesses this morning to give us the benefit of their experience, and their guidance, regarding the costs of illegal immigration and effective ways to limit those costs.

The current failure of enforcement is being felt throughout the nation, as the tide of undocumented aliens swells well beyond the six traditional settlement states of California, New York, Texas, Florida, Illinois and New Jersey. As of last April, legislatures in 43 states considered bills on immigration issues. Attempting to fill the vacuum left by earnest but hopelessly understaffed federal efforts, states sought to control access to education and other public benefits, strengthen employment verification, punish human trafficking, strengthen eligibility requirements for identification documents and voting, and coordinate law enforcement. County governments and mayors have similarly taken steps to regain some control over their fiscal fate.

Obviously, when Washington fails to exercise sovereign control over what is pouring into the national melting pot, states, counties and cities feel the heat. Although difficult to quantify precisely, the impact of illegal immigration on state, county and city budgets is undeniable, and growing. According to one estimate, those without a legal right to be here generate net fiscal costs approaching ten billion dollars nationally. The State of California is reported to have spent almost three billion dollars in a single year providing services to illegal immigrants. By one estimate, the County of San Diego spends more than fifty million dollars a year to arrest, jail, prosecute and defend illegal immigrants. Of that, federal reimbursements cover only about two million dollars.

A health care system already under severe strain risks being swamped by a continuing flood of uninsured illegal immigrants, many of whom use hospital emergency rooms for primary care. Federal law requires emergency medical departments to treat everyone. The national cost of such mandated free health services exceeds one billion dollars annually. This year, federal reimbursements will cover only one quarter of that total.

States, counties and cities have a right to expect the fiscal security that will only come when the federal government focuses on effective border security. Decades-long neglect of the sovereign responsibility to adequately police national boundaries and enforce national laws has transferred immense burdens downstream to local taxpayers. Any serious immigration reform must take account of those intergovernmental impacts and protect states and localities from fiscal shockwaves. From that perspective, effective external and internal enforcement programs are essential prerequisites to broader immigration reforms. Otherwise, any new immigration law will suffer the fate of the last effort twenty years ago, when good intentions were overwhelmed by weak follow-through.

When your basement is flooding, you plug the leaks first, then start the remodeling job. Plugging our porous immigration system – using federal dollars – will free states and counties to focus on their core responsibilities to protect the health and safety of all those seeking to build a better community.

This morning, we will hear testimony from six witnesses. Each of them brings a depth of experience and insight to this important discussion and we look forward to their testimony.